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## Empowering rural women entrepreneurs with ICT skills: an impact study

Fuzirah Hashim<sup>a</sup>\*, Zaini Amir<sup>b</sup>, Norizan Abd Razak<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia<sup>b</sup>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia<sup>c</sup>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia

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### Abstract

This paper is written to report on the impact study of ‘1nita’ project, a Malaysian government initiative that provides a platform for women entrepreneurs to build strong businesses through the use of information technology and the internet. Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered for this study. Results have revealed that the 1nita portal has given good impact to some, but not all the businesses. Recommendations have been given to ensure that the women entrepreneurs will become competitive at a global level through the exposure to technology-based learning.

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*Keywords:* women entrepreneurs; information technology; technology-based learning; internet

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### 1. Introduction

INita Project is a national project that aims to increase the e-participation of women, especially in economic activities in Malaysia. Specifically, the purpose of the project is to train Malaysian rural women, regardless of their age, racial background or economic status. The project is funded under the second stimulus package under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI), with the main organizer, .myDomain registry of Malaysia. .myDomain is a legal entity that is responsible for the registration of domain name for business enterprises in Malaysia. E-Community Research Centre from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has been given the role to do the training as well as the impact study of the project. This paper is based on the initial findings from interviews conducted with some participants from the 1nita project as well as from the content analysis of participants’ websites and 1nita platform from the zones of Melaka and Kuala Lumpur. The training for 1Nita Melaka was administered on 10-11<sup>th</sup> April 2010 and the venue was at Yayasan Melaka with about 100 participants while for the Kuala Lumpur location, there were about 100 participants. Two workshops were held at the Faculty of Science Information and Technology, UKM on 20 -21 March, 2010 for the 1<sup>st</sup> workshop and 3 - 4 April, 2010 for the second workshop. For this paper, the findings are taken from 48 participants out of 100 participants in the state of Melaka and for the Kuala Lumpur area, 88 participants were involved.

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\* Fuzirah Hashim. Tel.:0060193887842; fax:006389254577

E-mail address: [fuzirah@yahoo.com](mailto:fuzirah@yahoo.com)

## 2. Background

This Women Internet Entrepreneurship Program is proposed to meet the needs of some identified female communities to market and sell their products and services by using Internet infrastructure available in their areas (Norizan et al, 2010). For the benefit of all levels of participants, the interface of 1Nita platform is set in two languages; namely Bahasa Malaysia and English. Thus far, the programme has trained more than 500 women entrepreneurs from a few states throughout Malaysia. Several studies have been embarked on women entrepreneurs. The studies generally refer to challenges faced by women in venturing into online business. Norudin and Azman Che Mat (2010), for example, looked at whether there is a significance of psychological and environmental dimensions for Malaysian Muslim women to venture into online business. The result of the study shows that psychological factors are highly relevant and the role of environmental factors is also significant. Their study concludes that Muslim women “are going to be a perusal factor in economic advancement” especially in Malaysia. A survey by Rahmah (1998) shows that among Malaysian women, the computer is used for word processing by administrators, professionals, entrepreneurs, students, and housewives. Only a small number of women involved in the study use computers for data storage/analysis and learning purposes. The study also indicates that the computer is very useful for its effectiveness, convenience, ability to store and update data and information, and ability to save time. Women involved in the study also agree that the use of media, particularly e-mail, fax machines, and computers has increased work efficiency and productivity. In order to survive in the present job environment, they must take initiatives to learn new skills, particularly in relation to computers and other new technologies. In a study of women entrepreneurs, Carter and Cannon (2003) examined the motivational and behavioral characteristics of 60 female business owners, utilizing both structured questionnaires and unstructured interviews. They found that the need for independence was an important motivating factor to start a business for the women in their sample. Another study was conducted by Fariza and Md Zabid (1992) who discovered that the statistics of women participation in the labour force has been increasing marginally for the last thirty years. The sectors that appeal to these women are wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants, finance, real estate and business services. This study has indicated the significant role women plays in the economic development of the country. According to Hazem and Nikos (2009), for the participants who are reluctant and ignorant to the online assistance provided, this could be due to the fact that the learning environment is too formal for them, thus does not meet their needs as most of them are housewives or with low educational level. Thus, they would expect more informality in their learning. It is suggested that collaborative learning spaces be created in which informal learning can thrive.

## 3. Methodology

The program is run in two cycles for each location. In the first cycle, the participants chosen are given some talks on topics like internet marketing and language in advertising whereas, in the second cycle, which is usually after a gap of about a week, they are given some lessons on photographic technique as well as talks and demonstrations on payment method online. The questionnaire for the impact study is distributed during this cycle. An interview section is also conducted with the participants. This is done through the telephone. During the interview, the participants were being asked regarding the sales of their products and services as well as the growth of their business after the introduction of the portal to them.

## 4. Result of the Study

### 4.1 ICT Literacy

Two aspects are taken into consideration when analyzing ICT literacy among the 1Nita participants namely; the frequencies of usage of the facilities available to them and their abilities to use the computer. The findings are tabulated in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively. In general, the level of ICT literacy among the 1Nita participants from the Kuala Lumpur location and the state of Melaka are quite satisfactory. Out of the majority, 29 (33%) of the participants and 20 (23%) of the participants stated that they regularly used the personal computer and laptop respectively. The 1Nita participants added that this understanding is based on their experiences of using the personal computer and laptop which are common devices. While, 25 (28%) of the participants regularly assessed internet at home as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequencies of usage of the facilities available

Facilities	Never (%)	Seldom (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
Use Personal computer	9	26	22	33
Use laptop	17	27	18	23
Internet availability at home	15	24	19	28

Further analysis on the ability of the 1Nita participants in using computer and basic applications indicated that 65 (74%) of the participants know how to use Microsoft word, while 55 (63%) of the participants are able to use Power Point and Microsoft Excel respectively as shown in Table 2.

As for the ability to use the Internet, the data shows that only about half of the participants know how to use the Internet successfully. Between 33% to 50 % of the participants know how to read newspaper online, look for information, know how to communicate using e mail and other social media.

Table 2: Ability to use the computer

Usage of Computer	Yes (%)	No (%)
On and off the computer	74	26
Identify interface features	85	15
Use keyboard	88	12
Microsoft Word program	74	26
Power Point program	63	37
Microsoft Excel program	63	37
Multimedia (Adobe Photoshop) program	43	57
Web design	37	63

#### *4.2 Increase in Sales and Services*

The result of the telephone interview with participants from Melaka has revealed that only 8 out of 48 participants that are 16.67% mentioned that the 1Nita portal has given good impact to their business. One of the participants who have shown a marginal increase in sales from Melaka is Sarimah Katimin who operates a crackers business. According to her, her sales rose to 40% after using the 1Nita portal.

Another participant who has shown the second highest increase in sales in Melaka is Nur Syahirah Aminuddin who operates a bakery under the company name Nur Syahirah Aminuddin. She claims that there is a little increase in orders after she uses the portal, and the increase is about 30 %. One more participant who is quite happy with her 30% increase in sales after utilizing the 1Nita portal is Rohaimi Mohd Yusof. She is doing a business on livestock under the company name Pulau Sebang Poultry.

Nurul Farhana Abdullah who is in the business of tapioca crackers confidently declares that she has got between 10 to 15 customers through online business. She confirms that she has successfully received more customers through the portal although she had already got many loyal customers before.

The participant who has shown the least number of sales is Noridah Hj Katan who has a cake business under “Apex Target Enterprise”. She admitted that she has only received 1 order so far from the web.

From the Kuala Lumpur participants, an increase in timeline for the 2<sup>nd</sup> feedback telephone interviews resulted in a more positive response in terms of business growth of the participants. Those who have a Facebook account also have an increase in their businesses. The link to the 1Nita website and their business word press is posted at their Facebook account; this indirectly creates promotion and marketing for their business and also the 1Nita website. Almost all of the participants that regularly updated their websites and have a Facebook account had a 30% - 60% increase in sales and customers.

#### *4.3 Increase in Business*

Interviews conducted with the 48 participants reveal that none of the participants has so far increased the number of workers and expanded their premises. Only Nurul Farhana Abdullah who is operating the business of tapioca

crackers is working jointly with a new company managed by her friends with the name Fourz Marketing and Trading. She is also in the process of giving a brand name to her product.

Also, for the 1Nita participants who provide services such as tailoring, there is also an online market demand. An example is Pn. Sarimah Ismail who said that she received a lot of orders each month for dress making. She has 25 workers and her tailoring service sometimes pinch up to 100-300 pairs per month. This is a very good impact because the participant manages to maintain her business until now.

#### *4.4 Issues and Problems*

There are a few issues and problems brought up by participants during the process of the interview. One of the issues raised is the fact that participants do not have enough knowledge to use the 1Nita portal. One of them is Wan Esah Wan Long who is managing a “batik” silk business. She could not attend both the first and second meeting of the course. That is why until the day of the interview she never used the 1Nita portal. Nurul Huda Omar, who is doing the tapioca crackers business has the same problem and she only attended the two-day course of the first cycle. Besides, some of the participants forgot how to use the 1Nita portal after attending the two cycles of the course. Siti Rawan Baharum who has a handicraft business, for instance, forgets what she has learnt as she feels that she is easily forgetful as she is already in her 50s. She did attempt to use the portal but she failed and she gave up. The same goes with Tan Wee Wah who has an engineering business. She has started using the portal but she does not know how to update her website. According to her, she still needs a lot to learn to manage the website. Another participant, Zainab Paemin says that she does not understand a lot of things, for example, even how to login to the website. Eventually, she gave up and did not bother to use the 1Nita portal. From the Kuala Lumpur vicinity, 3 participants did not complete their website during the workshop, thus do not have their page on the 1Nita website and also the ‘.my domain’ (Wordpress website). Whereas, 2 participants do not want to continue on with the project; maintaining an online website.

However, there is a decrease in number of those who did not maintain and update their website page since the workshop ended. The reason for the decrease could be the 2<sup>nd</sup> group of participants consists of a younger age group compared to the 1<sup>st</sup> group thus, they are more competent with the computer and know how to update their page.

Also, there is a contact number provided for technical support. The following section focuses on the content analysis of participants, websites and 1Nita platform. The categories that are included here are the content, company information, product information and their attractiveness to buyers.

#### *4.5 Content*

15 businesswomen were involved in this analysis. All 15 participants use Malay language in their websites. Three of the fifteen use Facebook to advertise their products or services while another two use blogspot and .com.my.

#### *4.6 Company Information*

From the 15 participants, only 6 or 40% have registered their business with ROB. ROB is the registrar of businesses in Malaysia. As for the company information, 2 (13.33%) do not have any information in 1Nita website. 1 is rated 0, which means the information is stated in the website, but it has not been updated. 5 (31.25%) are rated 1, which means there is very minimal information provided. For 4 other participants, who constitute 26.67% of the total, information provided has been well-developed and only 3 (20%) are rated very good as the information provided is complete and up-to-date.

On the other hand, as for Wordpress, none of the participants involved provide any information. This is not that surprising as the ICT literacy level for Melaka participants is generally quite low as compared to the Kuala Lumpur participants.

#### 4.7 Product Information

In this study, product information is important to indicate the seriousness of the participants to further involved in the business. For the 1Nita platform, 1 participant, who constitutes 6.67% of the total participants, provided complete information about her product. She is also one participant who has got a blog and a facebook account. 4 or 26.67% participants are rated good as they provided quite good information about their product. 5 (33.33%) provided fairly good information about their product, however, another 5 (33.33%) have not provided any information about their product in the 1nita website. For Wordpress, similar to providing information about her company, none of the participants involved utilized this software to provide information about her product/service. Again, this was expected as the ICT literacy level of participants in this area is rather low.

With regard to network access, 4 participants (26.67%) utilize the facebook network and 2 participants (13.33%) have got their own websites.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, 1Nita project has successfully instilled and subsequently increased the confidence level of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia especially those at the rural areas. In terms of economic impact, relatively about 50 % of the participants have expressed increased in sales up to 30 - 60 %. After the four days of training, more 1Nita participants have successfully acquired more knowledge and skill about using the computer and accessing the Internet. In general, about 60% of the 1Nita participants from both Melaka and Kuala Lumpur areas have the potential and proper knowledge regarding computer use, which enables them to participate successfully in on-line business after the training. This is a good indication of the 1Nita participants' abilities to use the computer and to access the Internet, which is at a satisfactory level. The online presence of the participants has increased and this new-found skill has empowered them, which consequently increased the value of them being online economically and socially.

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